

Mobile-loving Thais still waiting for full 3G

October 2 2011, by Janesara Fugal



Potential Thai customers try various models of smartphones at a mobile telecommunication fair in Bangkok. While BlackBerrys and iPhones are fast becoming must-have accessories for many Thais, mobile Internet is still struggling to get out of the slow lane. A long-running business tussle means that Thailand has yet to fully roll out 3G, a decade after it was first launched in Japan.

While BlackBerrys and iPhones are fast becoming must-have accessories for many urban Thais, mobile Internet in the kingdom is still struggling to get out of the slow lane.

A long-running business tussle means that as other nations -- including impoverished Laos -- move to introduce faster 4G technology, Thailand has yet to fully roll out 3G, a decade after it was first launched in Japan.

Third-generation -- 3G -- technology allows [mobile phone users](#) to surf the Internet and download music and videos, and Thailand is the only

country in Southeast Asia not to have full 3G apart from military-dominated Myanmar.

"I bought this phone about three years ago because I thought I could use 3G but it has taken me three years to be able to actually use (the service)," said 25-year-old Bangkok resident Tiabtawan Limjittrakorn.

In contrast Cambodia has had 3G network since 2006, enabling [mobile users](#) there to access online content at a faster pace than their Thai neighbours.

A year ago a Thai court halted a 3G licence auction at the last minute after state-owned giant CAT argued that then-regulator the National Telecommunications Commission, had no authority to conduct the bidding.

The next attempt is expected in 2012.

CAT and TOT, another state-owned company, have lucrative rights to grant concessions for second-generation services and face a loss in revenue should operators acquire 3G licences and switch over to the new technology.

There is some limited coverage in some areas as the three major Thai telecoms operators -- Advanced Info Service (AIS), Dtac and True -- have side-stepped the licence issue by upgrading network [data transmission](#) speeds, building their own phone masts and providing 3G free of charge.

Another consortium of firms offers pockets of high speed coverage, although outside of these they have no signal at all.

The situation has turned Thailand's smartphone users into experts at

navigating the patchwork of services.

Some people juggle a variety of phones and SIM cards -- one for home, one for the train to work and maybe a third for the shopping mall.

Of Thailand's 21 million Internet users, 17.6 million connect to the web through their mobiles, according to research group Nielsen.

Social media is rocketing, with a 75 percent jump in the number of Facebook accounts to almost 12 million users since the beginning of the year.

William Wang, director of telecom practice at Nielsen Thailand, said the kingdom has "one of the fastest smartphone take up rates in Southeast Asian countries", with eight percent growth in 2010.

Promotions for discount smartphones are wildly popular, with a recent iPhone offer attracting a crowd of thousands at a Bangkok shopping centre, many of whom camped overnight.

"With smartphones and the [iPhone](#) in particular, I think you have the trend factor coming into play -- it's new, it's hip and it's a status symbol," Moody's analyst Laura Acres told AFP.

"People are lining up wanting to use these things but if you are going to pay the money, you want to use it for what it is designed for, you want it to be more than a fashion item. Operators must be champing at the bit to really have these platforms working."

True's total sales of smartphones soared to around three million this year, from 1.6 million in 2009, according to research from mobile maker HTC.

The operator's 3G chief Piroon Paireepairit said his group expects the number of smartphones on its network to triple in the next two years and said 3G would be the "number one key strategy" in the coming years.

Without data networks like 3G, "smartphones won't be smart," he said.

Telecoms and technology consultancy Ovum forecasts almost 30 million 3G subscribers in Thailand by the end of 2016.

It is hoped that a new body -- the National Broadcasting and [Telecommunications Commission](#) (NBTC) -- will be able to break the licence deadlock.

Anudith Nakornthap, Information Communication and Technology minister, said the government was "concerned" that Thailand did not yet have full 3G and expected it to be an "urgent" priority for the incoming NBTC.

But Moody's Acres said the "whole regulatory environment is so political", with "so many competing agendas".

"It is quite remarkable an entire industry has been stifled because of lack of a comprehensive regulatory framework," she said.

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